THE GUILT TRIP

BY MOHAMMAD ABDULLAH

A nudge from the backseat summons me from the shores of Cali under the bright sun warming my body, to the worn out truck I'm supposed to be driving. If it wasn't for my old man, I'd have sold this rust box to a scrapyard, or a museum would've suited it better. But he – the stubborn old bigot – strongly insisted on his son bringing his bride in this rust box, the man of traditions he is.

I could not protest to him, for the two of us were to see our parents and in-laws off as they breathe their last. Albeit if by a miracle, Hayley's parents, and my in-laws to be, last through the week to bless our marriage, they'd never see their grandchildren in this life. The two of us are equally responsible in extending our wedding day to the day when we just have to, for the sake of our elders. Not that I don't regret vowing to marrying her only after I had him behind bars. But now that I have an edge over him, and that our parents would want to witness the wedding of their children before they succumb to their Creator, I'm left with no other choice but to fulfil the promise I made to Hay and her parents.

Sucking the last drop of Red Bull from the last can I had slurped, I slow down to run my gaze through the empty road, in quest of a shop I could buy more energisers from. It did me no good, and hit the gas. The only thing I could've been looking for in this desert would be a mirage. My only hope is finding a station before the rust box runs out of gas and we end up waving scarves and sunbathing, sleep can wait.

I envy these slumberers by my side and in the back, and those who snore in the trailer abreast, while I fight a war against turmoil and hastiness. Who's to be blamed anyway? I'm at fault for giving Witness Protection to the only leads I have in dismissing the only case I'm unable to solve in my entire career as a Fed – The No Face Killer. It's been 13 years since I took the case, yet unsolved and the maniac is on the lose somewhere, butchering hundreds of people in his games and getting away with it every single time. That cunning bastard. Never leaves any trails, not a single evidence of his identity. Casey and Katie being one of the only known survivors of his ferocity. These 2 jerks have been a pain in the neck since the day I found them. Had it not been Hayley smothering my temper, I'd have had them locked away in a cell for interrogation. But they're of utmost priority to me, and I can't lose them from my sight until they're tried in court, testify and give us the details of what and how he tortures his victims before putting them out of their misery.

"You need to rest," Hayley peers through her lashes, the deliberately-insomniac me. "I can drive, I've had enough sleep."

But I nod in refusal. When I'm resolved to do something, I get shit done. She knows it, everybody knows it. A stubborn man of principles, I am. Just like my old man. Bigotry flows through our veins, it's a hierarchy that traces back to the Dictators and Kings. She knows that once I've made my mind, even if I had to crawl, I would. No wonder I'm after a case every cop in LAPD gave up on. The two thoughts overwhelm my mind, shoving me to frenzy. My body and

mind are in overdrive, eyes devouring the road for 3 days least. It won't take long for my brain to shut down and my body to collapse in fatigue.

"Lou's a pain. Was it really necessary to bring that jerk with?" She attempts to break the ice once more.

"He won't be long. No way I could've left without him." There were less words and more gasping in the words that slipped off my tongue.

"You always say that, Chess." She looks out the window while burying the frown that breached her face.

This was the only conversation I've had with her in the last 24 hours. She's been on about Lou the last 3 days, pleading to have him thrown off the truck. Although, both of them detest each other, but they're the only two I'd give away my everything for. When it dawns upon me that the three of us were a pack once, I shudder at the mere thought of glancing at the present. Nevertheless, the sweetest things are the first to be the bitterest.

When I come to think of the all the tough times I put her through, all the faith she had in me – in spite of the proverb feminists feel delighted to say "All men are the same" – it's nothing but the divine patience, as of a saint, that has been endowed to her, which sustains our relationship. A sane woman must have dumped a man like me for shutting her off on and on again a long time ago. A 15 year old relationship is no joke. Nor is an 8 year old engagement. Any normal couple would've lost the grandeur of having a significant other decades ago. But in spite of the time that whizzes past us, we held on to each other, and not a single bit has the charm diminished. The spark we had between us still glimmers. Seldom do we fight, and whenever her tolerance shatters, she starts to play with the Pokéball ring I gave her on our first date as kids, and I remember saying it out loud, "I choose you!". A ghost of a smile manifests on her face every time. That priceless, ghost of a smile. I turn my head around to ruffle with her soft hair to let them sift through my fingers, when the abrupt appearance of a sharp turn draws my hand away from her. The anchors hanging down my eyelids dropped all of a sudden, as if the movie just ended in a theatre. I think we...

The loud buzzing of flies revives me. I creep with my elbows to get a better view of where I am. My legs are numb, my arms are numb, damn, my whole body feels numb! The thought of finding myself secluded in a dark room with little to no light penetrating the walls or windows makes my skin crawl. Am I kidnapped? Where the hell are the others?! Bandages are wrapped all over my body, but no pain, this makes me certain of the morphine I'm dosed with. As my eyes find a bit of luminosity, I discover myself lying in what seems to be a bathtub. In a heartbeat, my subconscious cringes and I feel my chest and abdomen in a whim. No sutures, no incisions, Thank God! I take a heave of catharsis, and push against the floor to get myself up. But for some reason, my right leg scarcely bears my weight, and I trip into my bed of roses. As if my fall triggered a switch, the unprecedented door before me opens with a loud thud.

"Well, you look like shit!" I know that voice better than anyone, it's Lou. Instead of being freaking out, I feel glad to have a familiar face before me, in one piece with nothing but what a

man of his stature might call an itch. "They ask you to fasten your damn seatbelt for some Godforsaken reason, ya know."

"H-how long have I been out?" I struggle to move my lips, muttering is what make its way out. By the fatigue, it seems like a couple of idle days to me.

"A week, I think? I lost count." If he's being sardonic, now's not a good time to make blunt jokes. Even if, for a second, I assume he's telling the truth, we must reach for LA pronto. That's when he resumes talk. "Everyone's okay. Dad just dislocated a shoulder." He always refers to him as 'Old Man'. Some clandestine truth hollers through his voice.

"What is it, Lou?!" My patience would blow to smithereens any second now, so would my heart.

"We're lost. There's no fuel, no food, no parts for the truck either." These weren't words, these were spears. My mind kept reiterating them like hollers in a vale, and I shuddered at my own grim thoughts.

The silence is too loud for me to hear what he is moving his lips for. But now he seemed like standing a mile away from me. Don't leave me alone in this scorching darkness again! Without a second thought, I make a run for it. In hysteria, I charge in relentlessly and push Lou through the door, shattering it, and the two of us fall down an endless flight of stairs, rolling to a hallway. Lou springs up, red faced, wheezing, and before he clenches a fist to take a fling on me, his glare turns to my leg and the crimson look on his face vanished all of a sudden.

"What?" and I stare at him in sheer indolence and intrigue.

"Don't look!" He draws his hand over my face to turn it away, but I resist despite being forbidden, only to see a protruding bone fragment out of the scarlet bandage wrapped around my leg. "This may sting a little," and I haven't the foggiest notion of what happened next, probably because it all blackened afterwards...

While I was rejoicing the slumber I had missed through my entire career, albeit being knocked out on painkillers, I had the most flamboyant display of dreams of my life. There's one good thing about being a lucid dreamer, you're no longer bound by the laws of time and physics. Within the constellation of neurons, you are your own personal god. Eternal, omnipotent, and free. Countless times had I pictured my wedding night with Hay in uncountable different ways. And most of all, I imagined apprehending the man I've been fishing in the dark for eternity. But I always keep losing control over the part where I unmask the faceless bastard.

"Chess, honey, wake up," a melodious chirp smooths my fidgeting subconscious, and my blurred vision bears the sight of Hay's hum calling for me. In a whim, I grab hold of a bar for a staff and limp my way out towards the light.

Dazzling bright light almost blinded me. The light turned yellow and my skin began to sweat, as I find myself surrounded by sand dunes and worn houses, which seem like the ruins of a town that once belonged to some dead people.

I walk a distance to discover the car wreck in the suburbs of the settlement. We must have fallen off the highway and ended up here. Which means the highway won't be that far from here. Which means – they already left? Although, I followed Hay's voice outside, she's nowhere to be found. I must have been hallucinating or having a lucid dream the whole time. They must have gone to look for help. It's true what they say about deserts, the mirages and delusions can make you eat dirt thinking that it's a Mushroom Steak. I mustn't let thoughts of food prowl up in my mind, or my stomach will kill me!

Out of the blurred images from far ahead, a silhouette seems to come my way. A minute of gawking, and I discover Lou in his vest, covered in grease, sweat and mud, struggling to maintain his strut. Though he's fully aware he's not being watched, he's never let his cool down. All our youth, he kept repeating these words on several occasions: "When my time comes, I'd want Death to have a hard time on me, so that the fucker remembers that I wasn't an easy kill." Military school changed him. He never remained the hesitant and reserved Lou I once knew. But change is inevitable. No doubt, LAPD changed me, how come wouldn't the intense field training flip his switch? Homicides were all I saw, corpses were all he saw.

"3 hours on the Goddamn truck, can you believe it? We never should've listened to the old man!" Why wouldn't he be outrageous? I'd blame Dad too, for compelling me to take us to LA in his rust box.

Eyes to his right, then to his left. "Where are the others?" My curiosity is aroused, since I was expecting Hay, Case and Kate by his side. "Mum and Dad?"

His eyes imitated mine, and without a single word, he clutched my arm to wrap around his shoulder. No words were exchanged after, from either of us. Lou dragged me all the way to what seems like a barn house. Nothing has a clear visage in these ruins. Two knocks on the door and it pops open. We rush in before the brewing sandstorm begins to fill up every orifice in our bodies. In the end of all the furor, my anxiety crashes as I see Hayley and everyone else inside, sparkling colourful eyes staring back at me. But – Casey...? – turned gazes and nods answer my ambiguous question. Should have had this coming...

It's about damn time I get updated. I rest my back at a haystack, and without question, the answer follows.

"Lou must have told you. We're stranded. We're lucky enough to find refuge here. We're trying to fix the truck, but the storms keep interrupting. We're short on food and medications. If we don't get out of here, sooner or later we'll be facing the music."

Well, that's music to my ears.

Dusk falls and the hay is set ablaze. What a time to have a campfire and tell stories, real stories. Because reality is no less than a nightmare for all of us. Lou takes out a pack of cigarettes and marshmallows, and I hesitantly snatch the marshmallows. Another hand goes for the whole pack of cigs as well. I can't risk getting Lou weak, for he's the only healthy man around here. Me? I'm

no more than a liability. Everyone eats a marshmallow and splits, falling fast asleep a while later. Except for me and Lou, who watch closely as the flames cast themselves to our eyes.

I join hands and lower my head, praying to God to get us out of here.

"Your imaginary friend won't do squat to get us out of here, ya know." Lou scoffs. "He just likes watching people suffer, and struggle to breathe their last."

"Better to hold onto hope than to lose it." I take a heave. "So, you and Hay—"

"It'll never be the same again."

"Tragic how an unbreakable friendship went down in flames."

"You don't have any fucking idea, do you?" He was chuckling, but his eyes were as stolid as ever, full of contempt.

"Do I?"

"She hates me, man. You think I haven't—" and we both glance at the sleeping beauty.

My eyes shut as I hear mild rumbling in the clouds.

Coughs and laboured breathing bolts me up, and the glimpse of dust flying all over meets my eyes. They left me alone, again. Otherwise, I'd hear coughing, lots of coughing. It seems like they no longer care. I pick up my staff and head for the door with my hand covering my mouth. While I walk blindly, I stagger over a sack, and barely regain my balance. Damn it!

These bloody ruins again. I feel like I belong here now. Coarse and dry as I am.

Time for a little bath in the sun.

Oh, there they are. Rushing into the barn house, ignoring me as usual. Why am I smiling?

An hour has passed, maybe I should get back inside.

As I stand beside the door, I hear Hay and Lou talking.

"We finally have a window to make a run for it. The times couldn't have been more favourable—" and they hush at the creak of the door.

"I ran as fast as I could. The fucking oxygen tanks were gone!" Lou's exasperated.

"Wh—what're you talking about?" I demand.

And the corpses of my Mum and Dad welcomed my eyes. Why did I live to see this day...?

Hours of silence, yet the grief didn't settle on me. Not that our plights had lessened even a bit. Does bereavement feel this way?

I remember my last encounter with No Face. A man like him would've been a revolutionist, if he had walked the right path. I've never met such a serial killer my whole life. I mean, who the hell is so damn good at disguise that he plays with his victims by being one himself, and making them hallucinate over drugs to screw up the survivor's statement, if there is any? Hmm!

Drowned in guilt and remorse, I sense someone breathing on my face. As I open my eyes, a piece of metal shines over my face, and in a fix I reach for my gun. Gunshots deafened me. Missed, all of them!

Ignoring my leg, I chase him down. I have a feeling in my gut that it's him. To hell with apprehending, I'm going to gun the son of a bitch in cold blood right here and now! But he was long gone into the dark of the night. Howling of men could be heard from a distance.

Lou comes running behind me. "What happened?"

"We're not alone, Lou. We've got ourselves in deeper shit than I thought!"

Was all of this a setup? What is he doing here? Of all people, HIM?!

3 dead bodies, and no way out. We shouldn't be desecrating the dead. The least we could do is give them a dignified burial. When we make it out of here, we could take them back for a funeral. I kept circling around this thought.

"I'll go with you this time." I can't just sit here and expect miracles to happen!

A mile away, the truck laid, buried in a ton of sand. How can the truck crash and just stumble to the middle of nowhere?

Lou starts with his tools, and I limp ahead to hopefully find a road. But I fall into a crater, and not a small one. Because in front of me, is a kingdom of junked cars. A horrific sight, no doubt. I can't imagine how many people were here before us. The question is, where are they now? I holler at my friends, and they come running, to be as agape as I am.

"Maybe we could make use of these cars somehow." So we begin seeking our salvation in those cars. Not much further, another car in a drive-able state lied outside the crater. We discover a couple making out in it, albeit covered in blood. Wildlings!

"DO YOU HAVE ANY FUCKING IDEA WHERE YOU ARE?!" I'm overwhelmed with rage. They're making love in the middle of somewhere, let alone wounded and in a damaged car!

"Does the car still run?" Hayley strokes my shoulder, gesturing me to calm down.

The boy breaks the ice. "I've tried starting it, but I'm not that good with cars. I'm—"

"Save it. Let's get you out of here." Lou's as calm as still water, though sweating from every pore in his body.

Lou fixed the rust box's engine with the parts he took from other cars, but we couldn't have left the dead – for dead.

"I need another day to get it stable for a drive," said Lou. We've waited this long, wouldn't hurt to wait another day.

And so we head for the barn house, where noise and whimpering greeted us. Lou and I draw our guns and bust in to reveal a bunch of hillbillies feasting on the bodies, like it was another barbecue. I didn't hesitate for a second to shoot them down, without a ghost of indignation. Now I know where all the people went to. It's a massacre...!

The loud claps of bullets sprouted an army of maneaters to head for our direction. My heart is beating louder than their screams, and I no longer feel agonised. We bolt the door and put out the fire, hoping for those half-wits to spare us. I'm drowned in fear but I'm thrilled. Adrenaline being pumped into my veins like water through a crack in a dam. I'm almost tempted to go all out on the ambush, but all I have is a pistol and my ammo is in the truck. Never occurred to me that I'd be needing it sooner or later.

They bang the door frequently, and soon enough they tire out and leave us be. I black out in the meantime, the morphine wore off.

I wake up with Hay's shrieks, and find the boy dead. The door was bolted tight, there's no way anyone could've gotten in. I'm unable to cope with all the dilemma happening all of a sudden, and my hand quivers as I back away and my gun pointed at everybody. He's in here. I'm sure of if. He could be anyone of us.

"WHERE'S LOU?!" I strike silence in the girls with my yell.

The door is knocked twice. "It's Lou, open up." So the door wasn't shut after all. Lou walks in and is startled by the gun pointed at him. "Whoa, whoa, it's me. Oh my God!" and turns his face away at the sight of dead Fred. "It w-was dar—dark and I c-couldn't fix it, so I brought ammo." I think he just pissed his pants. I've never seen him lose his cool this way.

We can't wait any longer. We need to leave before dawn, pronto. We load the guns and Hayley cleans my wound while Lou struggles to put the bodies in sacks and Katie and Jessica keep watch from the door.

"I never wanted to put you through all this, Hay."

"Don't. We should be glad we're still alive. Our parents are dead anyway." She was sobbing as she said it. How much longer can she hide the anguish behind that face? I indulge myself in her angst.

My wounds were healing pretty fast, and I felt better with the OD'ed morphine in my blood. But now that it wore off the pain would no longer subside, and it strikes back.

"Just give me more morphine and I'll be fine," I said. She didn't respond, but stopped and frowned at me.

"We didn't have any medicine to help with your wounds, what're you talking about?"

She must be kidding, right?

We were trapped in the limbo of our thoughts, when we were attacked by the cannibals off guard. They clutched Katie and dragged her away. It all happened so suddenly that I reluctantly ran after them without an extra mag. Lou comes after me but I stop him.

"Bar the door. Keep it shut and don't open it. I can't risk losing you!"

"We won't leave without you, please come soon!"

Now that I'm so close to winning my case, I can't lose my only witness. I was supposed to be fucking protecting her God damn it! Bullet by bullet, I shoot them down and go full Rambo with the rest. There was blood all over, and I was eerily injured without knowledge of being hit. And when I thought I was finished, "Hey, Chester!" is whispered from my back, and I'm concussed.

I'm still unconscious, when I bear the sight of Lou dragging me, terribly wounded himself. "What happened?" I blurt out with my mouth tasting of blood.

"It's over. It's all over. Ugh!" and I'm knocked out again.

When I regain consciousness again, I find myself in a hospital bed, surrounded by my coworkers.

"Don't strain yourself. You're safe now." I'm so pleased to have proper bandages to prevent the wounds from festering. Everything feels so nice. But, where's—

"A patrol found you unconscious in your truck near Vegas, they've been over and over your last location for weeks." I've been over this question several times now to have shown any reaction to it. "We towed your truck to your home."

"W-where's Hayley? Where's the witness?"

"An abandoned farm was located 20 miles from where we lost you. Several burnt bodies were discovered there. We think they might be—" they pause at a sudden glare from me.

"My friend – Lou was with me when we escaped. He was the one who saved me."

"Sir, do you think he might have...?" I shuddered and my spine froze with horror, as the awful mystery unravelled itself. "A tremendous amount of LSD was found in your blood, along with some other drugs."

Lou was the No Face Killer – and I always denied it. The stranding was a setup, and Hayley was equally involved. They wanted to get rid of me. Hating each other for years was just a decoy.

About a week later, I hop into Dad's truck and drive back to the crash site – in the middle of the Nevada. The barn house, the houses, everything was set on fire. Nothing but black rotting debris remained, with flies floating all over it.

It was just then when I noticed a whole lot of flies floating over the trunk, and a pungent rotting smell accompanying them. I open it up – and a sharp cold runs down my spine – as I discover Lou's body – wrapped up in plastic. My hands quiver vigorously, my heart almost blows up, my lungs almost collapse, as the shut the trunk and walk away – smirking...

CASE CLOSED